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Trade Unions in a Democracy


by
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LESLIE SAWHNY
PROGRAMME
OF
TRAINING
FOR DEMOCRACY

Number Thirteen

LESLIE SAWHNY PROGRAMME OF TRAINING FOR DEMOCRACY

Pamphlet Series

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products of factory industry. They grow along with the growth of that industry. Those who desire to abolish them will have to decide first to abolish modern industry.

The other important fact to be noted is that trade unions could grow only because of the existence of political democracy. Political democracy secured for workers some political rights such as those of freedom of press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly and organisation. In time, they also got the right of vote. Franchise was widened from time to time, and in the end there was adult franchise. Workers utilised all these democratic rights for establishing organisations and for conducting struggles for the improvement of their conditions. But even in a democracy, workers had to wage a long and bitter struggle for securing recognition of their right to organise. Traders and manufacturers who had led the struggle for political freedom against Kings and feudal lords were not prepared to concede the freedom that had been won to other classes of the people. They were inclined to regard workers' organisations as illegal conspiracies for bringing about breaches of contracts of service. They were an encroachment, they thought, on their freedom of contract. The law and the established custom of those days supported their point of view. In England, there were the Combination Acts and, until they were repealed in 1824, organisation of trade unions was illegal. Even after their repeal the way was not smooth or even. Trade unions were still regarded as liable to pay damages to employers for inciting their workers to commit a breach of their contract of service. The legal battles to win immunity from criminal and civil prosecutions had to be fought time and again and it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that the issue was at last decided in favour of trade unions. Law had to adjust itself to the demands of the new situation. Workers had grown numerically,

their weight in the society had increased, they had developed into a powerful political force and in the social and political conditions created by democracy it was no longer possible to deny them the elementary right of organisation.

Trade unions developed in industrially advanced countries along with the growth of industries and the advance of political democracy. It is not necessary here to trace the history of that development. It will be sufficient to say that by the middle of this century trade unions have acquired in all modern societies an honoured and assured place. They are recognised as lawful, independent organisations of workers and they are no longer required to justify their existence or contend for their right to exist and represent workers. They are now accepted as an essential part of the industrial society. They have won for themselves the right to be consulted by employers and the Government on all industrial matters. They are progressively winning for themselves the right to be consulted on all matters of public policy. As Samuel Gompers the great leader of the American trade union movement, stated: "Trade unions are the real defenders of the peoples' interests; the living, throbbing, working engines to secure civilized, humane, societary conditions for all mankind."

Men who have risen from the trade union movement have in recent years occupied positions of trust and eminence in many countries. They are being called upon in larger and larger measure to shoulder national and international responsibilities. It is accepted on all hands that no significant increase in production can take place without the willing and enthusiastic co-operation of trade unions. Efforts are therefore made in all democratic countries to secure that co-operation and to

make trade unions a part and parcel of the national endeavour for a better and fuller life. Dealing with this high status that trade unions have acquired and the new role that they have to play, Prof. Harold Laski wrote ten years back : "It is no exaggeration to say that the status of trade unions is today far higher and their power far greater, than it was a generation ago. No doubt they have lost some of the functions they used to perform, or at least, some of those have become far less central to their activities than used to be the case; but they have also taken on new functions which, as one examines them, involve immensely great social responsibilities than before" (*Trade Unions in the New Society*, P. 4).

The only exception to this general phenomenon of the growing recognition of trade unions as a powerful social force is to be found in totalitarian countries. Even in those countries they cannot altogether ignore the large mass of workers. Aware of the danger involved in allowing workers to form their own independent unions, rulers of totalitarian countries herd them into state-sponsored and state-controlled organisations. With this object in view, Hitler organised in Nazi Germany the Labour Front. Communist rulers have organised similar organisations in countries under their domination. Those are not independent organisations of workers formed by themselves for the protection and advancement of their own interests. They are established, controlled and managed by the Government. Their main function is to implement and advance the policies of the Government and not to protect the interests of workers. The Government has assigned to them some of the functions in the matter of the administration of welfare funds. Russian unions perform those functions like any other department or agency

of the Government. They have no independent existence of their own and cannot pursue any policies of their own. The Communist Party which controls the Government also controls the trade unions and runs them as methodically and rigidly as any other organisation in the country. Trade unions in other communist countries follow the same pattern. In Hungary when, on the outbreak of the national revolution, trade unions went out of control, they were mercilessly suppressed and leaders of trade unions and workers' councils were subjected to heavy penalties. Some outstanding leaders were sentenced to death and had to pay with their lives for their crime of championing the interests of workers.

Under Communism there is no place for trade unions as independent organisations of workers. A totalitarian regime cannot tolerate the existence of alternative centres of power. It is only in a democracy that such centres can exist and compete with each other for influencing the policies of the Government and the society. Trade unions are tolerated in communist countries only as "transmission belts," as Stalin stated in *Problems of Communism*, to convey the decisions and policies of the communist party to the large masses of workers. Lenin regarded them as "schools of Communism" and insisted on their "unquestioning sub-ordination to a single will," of course, of the leaders of the communist party. The second congress of the Communist International called upon Communists to "sub-ordinate factory committees and unions to the Communist Party."

After capture of power, Communists destroy free trade unions and replace them by other service organisations. Before capture of power, however, they try their best to get into trade unions and use them for their

political ends. In *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* Lenin advised them "to resort to all sorts of stratagems, artifices, illegal methods, evasions, subterfuges only to get into the Trade Unions, to remain in them and to carry on communist work within them at all costs." (*Selected Works* Vol. II p. 373) As is well-known to all trade union workers, they follow the policy of "rule or ruin." They will either bend a union to their will or work for its destruction.

Unions can grow as independent organisations if they are assured a recognised place in industrial relations. As long as they are not recognised, unions can do very little work for their members. They turn their attention then to agitation and general propaganda which takes on a political colour. With recognition, they can represent members' grievances and demands, discuss about terms and conditions of employment and develop good industrial relations. They become then responsible organisations with a stake in the progress and prosperity of the industry. They become interested in the maintenance of discipline, in the improvement of production and productivity and in the avoidance of strikes and lock-outs. No doubt, the recognition of a union and collective bargaining with it impose some restrictions on employers and management. But they are inevitable in a democracy. Political democracy imposes restrictions upon the powers of the Government. Trade unions seek to impose similar restrictions upon the arbitrary power of employers at the work place. Trade unions extend democracy to the industrial sphere. They seek to secure for workers a voice in the arrangements at the work place and in the determination of terms and conditions of employment. In an industrial society democracy will be meaningless to workers unless

that voice is secured for them. Trade unions and collective bargaining with employees are therefore an essential part of a democratic way of life in an industrial society.

Being a product of democracy and wedded to its broadening and deepening, a trade union must itself function in a democratic manner. It must give equal rights to all its members without any differentiation on ground of caste or community or religion or language or sex. Members must have full control over the affairs of the union and officers and members of the managing committee must be elected periodically in a free and fair manner. Accounts must be kept in a proper manner and they must be submitted from time to time to the scrutiny of members. A union must not be a play thing in the hands of a leader, however clever he may be, nor in the hands of a political party, however influential it may be. It must be and always remain an organisation of workers, for the benefit of workers and controlled and managed by workers. It is only as such that it will be able to protect and promote the interests of workers and advance the cause of democracy.

In the democracy that is developing in India, trade unions have been accorded a place of honour. The Constitution recognises workers' right to organise. The Indian Trade Unions Act and laws relating to industrial relations have given them a legal position and endowed them with a number of rights and privileges. The Five Year Plans make a special mention of trade unions and direct that they should be encouraged and assisted in the interest of better industrial relations. The Third Five Year Plan stated: "They (trade unions) have to be accepted as an essential part of the apparatus of industrial and economic administration of the country." It laid emphasis upon the proper implementation of the

Code of Discipline which has been voluntarily accepted by all the three parties, namely, employers, employees and the Government. As a result of these favourable conditions and the growth of industries, there has been a large increase in the number of trade unions and their members during the last twenty years. In 1951-52 there were in the country 4,623 registered trade unions and the number of members of unions submitting returns was 19,96,000. In 1968 the two figures respectively were over 16,000 and over 51 lakhs.

Many of these unions are small plant unions, but some amongst them are growing into big and powerful industrial unions on a local or regional basis. And a good number amongst the latter are also developing as financially sound, self-reliant and independent organizations with a full-time staff, well functioning office and leadership rooted in the union itself. This is the most welcome development in the trade union movement, a development which augers a bright future for the movement as a whole. The movement had developed so far, as an appendage of the national movement or as appendages of various political parties. But with the growth of strong and self-reliant unions it will acquire an independent position and status and will be able to exercise influence not only in the field of industrial relations but also in the field of national affairs.

The trade union movement has already acquired a certain status in the public life of the country. In the Indian Labour Conference and in all tripartite bodies it has a status equal to that of employers' organisations. It is consulted by the Central and State Governments on all matters affecting the interests of workers. In course of time trade unions may have their own representatives in Parliament and in State legislatures. There

will be a decline in the domination of political parties but, far from a decline, there will be a growing increase in the political interests of unions. Many industrial matters are even to-day governed by legislation. The extent and scope of such matters are likely to increase. The interests of trade unions will also cover an ever-widening field. They will no longer be restricted to wages, allowances, hours of work and similar other industrial matters. All social, economic and political issues will engage their attention. Trade unions will then feel compelled to keep an eye on what happens in legislature and endeavour to influence those happenings either through their own representatives in those bodies or through pressure groups and lobbies. This influence of workers on the politics of the country is bound to increase as they get better organised and more and more conscious of their rights and responsibilities. And as it grows, the politics of the country will become more and more democratic.

Trade unions will also acquire a larger voice in the determination of terms and conditions of employment and in the arrangements at the workplace. Recognition of trade unions and collective bargaining will become a common feature of industrial relations. There will be more and more co-operation between unions and management. The second and the Third Five Year Plan have placed great emphasis on workers' participation in management and suggested certain concrete measures for securing it. The Third Plan stated in particular: "For the peaceful evolution of economic system on a democratic basis, it is essential that workers' participation in management should be accepted as a fundamental principle and an urgent need." (p. 254) It is to be hoped that both the Govern-

ment and employers will accept this recommendation of the Planning Commission and enable workers to play their proper role in the development of industries.

In order to discharge effectively these bigger responsibilities which will fall on their shoulders, trade unions will need a large body of trained and competent functionaries. Most of them will emerge from the ranks of workers. With the spread of education and the growth of self-confidence it will not be difficult for workers to create out of their ranks competent leaders to conduct the affairs of their unions. When this happens workers will take a keener interest in their unions and will raise the funds that will be necessary for their proper and effective functioning. This will remove the biggest difficulty unions are facing today, the difficulty of inadequate financial resources. It will be equally necessary to educate workers about the new role and functions of trade unions. In a democracy, and more particularly in a developing economy, it is not enough if they act as merely protective organisations interested only in the protection of wages and allowances. They have a more positive role to perform. They have to protect and advance the multifarious interest of workers, both as a producer as well as a citizen and a human being. They have also to advance the interests of the society as a whole, as workers can progress and prosper only as the society progresses and prospers. All these place new responsibilities and imposes new functions upon unions. The large mass of workers must be told about them and persuaded to give their conscious support to unions in discharging them.

Functioning in this manner, trade unions will develop as democratic organisations and will at the same time create a stable basis for the larger democracy

which is growing in the country. But this type of functioning is possible only under conditions of economy growth. If growth does not take place, if the economy stagnates or deteriorates, it will not be possible for trade unions to hold workers in check and stop them from resorting to undemocratic methods for the ventilation and redress of their grievances and demands. Under these circumstances, democratic unions break down and revolutionary unions of the communist or some other variety take their place. Having no commitment to democracy the latter are free to act in any way they choose. They may ally themselves with totalitarian forces of the right or the left and wage a war against democracy itself. This is the grave danger that the country has to face. If economic progress does not take place as planned, if poverty and misery grow and if unemployment increases, democratic trade unions which have developed in the country during the last fifty years or so, will not be able to hold in check the forces of disruption. It is, no doubt, the duty of trade unions to fight for and defend democracy, but it is equally the latter's duty to make it possible for unions to function effectively through the adoption and implementation of proper economic policies. In the implementation of those policies trade unions have a big role to play. They can help improve and increase production so that the cake to be shared may be of larger size. They can also exercise restraint upon the demand for the immediate consumption of the entire share so that more may be saved and invested in the interest of the speedier growth of the economy. This is a very difficult task to perform ; but it is only by performing it that the trade union movement will be able to secure its own growth and that of democracy.

In India the emphasis has to be on co-operation and not on competition. In our country various sections of the people must co-operate with each other so that production and national wealth may increase and there may be more of food and employment for all. This applies more particularly to employers and to workers and their trade unions. A spirit of co-operative enterprise must develop amongst them so that working together they may be able to produce for the society larger quantities of goods and services. There is hunger and misery in our country, but over and above that we have in our midst disloyal and disruptive elements who desire to exploit them for their own political ends. They have no desire that our democratic experiment should succeed. For, its success would disprove their thesis that no social and economic advancement can take place without the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. They would like India to abandon the path of democracy and follow in the footsteps of Russia and China. They exploit the dissatisfaction and the discontent of workers for spreading bitterness and distrust and disbelief in the capacity of the country to overcome her present difficulties. Those elements must be isolated and exposed before workers as the enemies of democracy and orderly progress.

Trade unions are now regarded as one of the vital institutions of democracy. It is true that trade unions can exist only in a democracy, but they are also a bulwark of democracy. If there is no democracy in the industrial field, it cannot exist too long in the political field. Trade unions are no longer concerned merely with questions of wages, hours and allowances. They are concerned with all-round life of workers, as producers, as consumers and as citizens. The scope of trade union

work has expanded enormously. They are now interested in all national problems, in economic as well as in educational policies, in the problems of public health as well as in the problems of currency and credit, in welfare activities as well as in measures for national defences, in questions of rural development as well as in questions of war and peace. They demand to be heard and consulted on all these matters and the demand is being progressively conceded. Even in the industrial field, there is substantial increase in the scope of their work. They cannot now rest content with making demands ; they have to shoulder the responsibility of making it possible for the concern to concede those demands. They have to accept the responsibility of expanding production and increasing productivity. They cannot any longer make irresponsible demands and adopt an attitude of unconcern towards the fate of enterprise. It is their interest in the enterprise and the industry which is now persuading them to put forward the demand for participation in management.

There is now no longer a clear line dividing the functions of management from those of trade unions. Prof. Laski has stated: "It is impossible for unions to accept an arbitrary line between their function and the employers' functions." Tannenbaum makes the same point more explicitly. He has written: "There is no line that can be drawn between the two spheres of interest, except at a single moment in a given history. The situation is fluid, and will remain so. Neither the workers nor the management can define their relative position in final terms. In fact, the very appearance of the trade union is a denial of the unchallenged authority of the management. A union, by assuming res-

ponsibility for the welfare of its members and acting as their agent, must of necessity be concerned over every item that affects their fortunes. Every activity of management bears upon the well-being of the workers. The disputes at any moment are over a temporary delineation of a moving line. The end is participation in management.” (*A Philosophy of Labour*, p. 160). These expanding functions of trade unions have placed upon them new responsibilities and have also opened out for them new opportunities for service to their members as well as to the society as a whole.

In a democracy there is no other way but to recognise the position of trade unions and to seek in co-operation with them the solution of workers' problems. Out of the age-old twin methods of dangling the carrot or using the whip the latter method is not possible in democracy. A stage has been reached in democratic societies where the only alternative to securing the willing participation of workers is the abolition of democracy itself. As Prof. Laski has stated in his well known book on the role of trade unions in the modern age: “We have increasingly to accustom our minds to the realisation that hunger and fear have ceased to be instruments of discipline upon which a democratic community may successfully rely. Or, at least, if it seeks a continued reliance upon them, it is no longer likely to remain a democracy. For constitutional government in industry is rapidly reaching the point where the alternative to it is despotism tempered by rebellion.” (p. 144).

In the era now created by technological progress and the expansion of democracy both employers as well as workers have to be conscious of their social responsibilities. No employer can regard his factory as

his private preserve and run it in any manner that he likes. There are a number of limitations on his rights of ownership. His right of hiring and firing men at his sweet will is no longer available to him. He must pay them a wage that is decided by law or by collective agreement. He must provide in the factory the conditions of work that are laid down by law. He cannot close down the factory at his sweet will. Even in a private enterprise economy, he has to run it more or less as a public concern. The society is vitally interested in the proper and efficient running of every factory. That is more so in an economy that is developing according to a plan. The society cannot allow an owner to ruin his factory through bad management, or through bad labour relations. Nor can it allow workers and their union to ruin it through perpetual quarrels and conflicts. The society expects both sides to settle their differences through mutual adjustment and to co-operate with each other for the more efficient running of the enterprise. A spirit of co-operation and adjustment is the demand of the new age both on employers and trade unions.

In a democracy there is no scope for class war. A class war can end only in the elimination of one class or the other, and the establishment of a dictatorship. A democracy provides for the settlement of political issues through discussion. It must provide for the settlement of industrial issues also through the same method. Trade unions follow that method when they engage in collective bargaining. Collective bargaining may sometimes lead to a strike, but that is the last weapon in the armoury of a trade union; and the strength and the effectiveness of a union lies not in the constant use of that weapon but in the successful avoidance of its use. There are

classes in a society and there are conflicts of interest among them ; but virtue lies not in intensifying those conflicts but in lessening and adjusting them. In democracy various sections and classes of the people learn to live together in tolerance and amity. It is the task of trade unions to aid that process and simultaneously strive to raise the economic, social and cultural level of workers so that they may share as equal partners in the progress of society. It is thus that trade unions can transform political democracy into economic and social democracy.

Emphasising the close relationship between workers and community's interests, Walter Reuther, the leader of the automobile workers of America, once stated "In our rapidly changing and more closely interrelated and interdependent economic and political society labour cannot be an island unto itself. Labour cannot advance and make progress at the expense of the rest of the community. It can advance and make progress only as it shares in the advances and progress made by the whole community." Trade unionists in all democratic countries should always keep in mind this advice of one of the most outstanding leaders of the American trade union movement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V. B. Karnik is a trade union and political worker of long standing. He has been actively associated with several trade unions and their central organisations like the All India Trade Union Congress, the Indian Federation of Labour and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha.

He was for several years Managing Editor of *Independent India* later the *Radical Humanist*. V. B. Karnik has several books to his credit. Among them are :— Trade Unions in India—a survey; Strikes in India; Trade Union & Politics; N. M. Joshi, Servant of India; and Chinese Aggression — Background & Sequel.

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Published by Arvind A. Deshpande for Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy, Orient House Mangalore Street, Ballard Estate, Bombay 1 and printed by F. Wiesinger, Shakuntala Publishing House, at Examiner Press, Dalal Street, Bombay 1.

LESLIE SAWHNY PROGRAMME OF TRAINING FOR DEMOCRACY

The Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy began on 1st April 1968. A non-partisan programme, its aim is to train public workers, social workers, youth leaders, in citizenship, effective organization and the principles of liberal democracy. Courses are tailored to the needs of different groups and are held in various languages and places. In 1973 the programme established its own permanent training Centre at Deolali, where most of its courses will now be held.

The syllabi of these training courses, which last anything from a weekend to 15 days, cover three main heads; the principles of democracy as developed and practised throughout the world; methods and techniques of organisation; and Outward Bound exercises with an emphasis on the building of character and leadership.

By March 1973, the Programme had organised over 100 training courses and over 15 seminars. Its alumni and participants in various courses and seminars then numbered over 3500.

A great deal of the inspiration for this Programme came from the late Col. Leslie Sawhny, who, apart from being a distinguished soldier, a keen sportsman and an enlightened industrialist, was a great liberal and lover of freedom. He had joined in developing this project and had agreed to participate in its direction just prior to his passing away in December 1967.

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